

Historical abuse in Dutch Catholic institutions: A qualitative evaluation of victim-survivors' experiences with redress procedures

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Abstract

This study explores claimants' experiences with redress procedures addressing historical institutional abuse by Catholic clergy in the Netherlands, examining three areas: complaint and compensation procedures, civil court cases, and mediation. Based on interviews with 18 claimants, findings indicate significant procedural flaws, especially within the Reporting Centre which was frequently described as rigid and impersonal, offering little room for narrative expression or emotional responsiveness. In contrast, the Commission for Help, Recognition, and Reparation (Committee HEG) combined clearer procedural structure with more empathetic engagement, while Triptych mediation strengthened participants' sense of agency through co-created dialogue and relational repair. The Temporary Regulation provided standardised financial compensation but lacked space for personalised acknowledgement or historical nuance, particularly in cases involving gendered forms of harm. Procedures such as the Reporting Centre and civil litigation intensified distress for many survivors due to their adversarial tone and narrow evidentiary focus. Mechanisms like Committee HEG, Triptych mediation, and institutional mediation were generally seen as less harmful, as they allowed for more participatory formats, emotionally attuned interactions, and visible gestures of recognition. The study contributes to debates on institutional abuse and redress by identifying how concrete design features – such as control over process, the handling of evidence, and modes of acknowledgement – shaped victim-survivors' perceptions of fairness and recognition, thereby revealing the practical workings of procedural and restorative justice. A more systemic approach is essential, one that centres victim-survivors' voices, addresses

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broader institutional harms, and ensures that justice processes respond meaningfully to victim-survivors' lived realities.

Keywords

Historical institutional abuse, Dutch Roman Catholic Church, victim experiences, redress, procedural justice, restorative justice

Introduction

Quite degrading. Very intrusive. It wasn't in any sense the victim impact statement . . . it was more like justification for compensation . . . That's how I felt it was . . . That's how it impacted on me. I had to justify why I should receive any payment from them at all.

These words of indignation were shared by a male victim-survivor of clerical sexual abuse in Australia who was questioned in front of the panel at the Melbourne Response, a redress procedure addressing historical institutional abuse (Courtin, 2015: 150). This case embodies a prototype experience of redress procedures examined in this article, namely how justice modalities intended to offer recognition and repair often re-injure victim-survivors (or claimants) participating in these processes addressing clerical abuse (Bisschops, 2014; Kips, 2013; Ruppert, 2023; Van Dijk, 2018). This article utilises procedural and restorative justice approaches to analyse how claimants experienced redress procedures related to clergy abuse in the Netherlands; specifically to identify elements within the procedures with re-injuring potential.

Historical abuse within the Catholic Church is a global issue, initially perceived in the early 21st century as primarily affecting the United States and Canada (Tamarit et al., 2023). Estimates suggested that at least 11,000 minors were abused by clergy in the U.S. between 1950 and 2002 (Terry, 2008). However, since 2010, numerous investigations across Europe, Latin America, and Australia have documented extensive historical abuse, mostly occurring between 1945 and 1970 (Klijn, 2015). In France, the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church (CIASE) estimated that 330,000 children had been victims of abuse by clergy and Church-affiliated members since 1950 (Sauvé et al., 2021). Germany's Mannheim – Heidelberg – Gießen (MHG) Study¹ (Dreßing et al., 2018) confirmed at least 3,677 cases between 1946 and 2014, while inquiries in Switzerland, Austria, Spain and Portugal revealed large-scale abuses, often underreported due to missing records and institutional suppression (Gabilondo Pujol et al., 2023; Klasnic Commission, 2019; Strecht et al., 2023). Beyond Europe, major inquiries have exposed similar patterns. In Australia, the Royal Commission (2017) found that 7% of Catholic priests were accused of abusing children. In Chile, investigations in 2018 identified 158 Church members implicated in sexual abuse, leading to mass bishop resignations. In New Zealand, the Church admitted in 2022 that 14% of its clergy had been accused of abuse since 1950 (Royal Commission into Abuse in Care, 2024).

Reports differ in methodology, distinguishing between studies estimating the scale of abuse through population-based research and those documenting reported cases from official inquiries and victim reporting mechanisms. For example, large-scale estimates exist for Ireland (Terry, 2015) and Belgium (Adriaenssens et al., 2010), while figures based on reported cases have been compiled in Belgium (Belgische Kamers van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2017; Verhoeven and Aertsen, 2017) and Australia (Tamarit et al., 2023).

In the Netherlands, the Deetman Research Committee on the Sexual Abuse of Minors within the Roman Catholic Church – established by the Bishops' Conference and the Conference of the Dutch Religious – conducted an independent inquiry into sexual abuse in Dutch Catholic institutions.² The Committee estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 victim-survivors had experienced abuse, mostly between 1945 and 2000 (Deetman et al., 2011). Named after its Chair Wim Deetman, the report aimed to establish an official account of sexual abuse within the national episcopates of the Roman Catholic Church, responding to growing media outrage. Initially focusing on male victims, Committee Deetman later included approximately 400 female survivors (Deetman, 2013).

However, clergy-perpetrated abuse in the Netherlands extended beyond *sexual* abuse. At least 15,000 girls and women experienced forced unpaid labour in laundries and sewing workshops run by the Sisters Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (hereafter abbreviated as Good Shepherd) between 1860 and 1978. These institutions – affiliated with the Catholic Church – operated in the cities of Tilburg, Zoeterwoude, Almelo, Bloemendaal and Velp.³ In 2019, around 160 of the victimised women – also known as ex-pupils of the Good Shepherd – sought recognition and compensation for psychological abuse and forced and unpaid labour against the Dutch branch of the Congregation, after a report detailing the forced labour and highlighting the Dutch government's complicity was published (Houwerzijl and Heerma van Voss, 2019).

Responding to these revelations, diverse redress mechanisms were established in the Netherlands, including *institutional* procedures initiated by Church or state bodies and *non-institutional* processes shaped in dialogue with victim-survivors and the defending institutions.⁴ Institutional responses began with the Reporting Centre for Sexual Abuse in the Roman Catholic Church (2011), followed by the Commission for Help, Recognition and Reparation (commonly referred to as the HEG Committee (2013)), *institutional mediation* (2013), and Final Action (2015). While the first, second, and fourth procedures focused primarily on financial compensation, institutional mediation offered a dialogical alternative. In 2020, the Dutch state introduced the *Temporary Regulation on Financial Compensation for Victims of Violence in Youth Care*, extending compensation to victim-survivors of forced labour, including former Good Shepherd pupils. Non-institutional responses emerged alongside these formal mechanisms. Most notably, Triptych restorative mediation (2011) was developed by victim-survivors in collaboration with individual congregations, emphasising dialogue and mutual acknowledgement. A small number of survivors later turned to *civil litigation* to pursue institutional accountability after engaging with one or more of the existing procedures.

This article examines how claimants experienced these procedures in practice. It builds upon work from – among others – Daly (2014), Daly and Davis (2021a), Gallen (2023), and Keenan et al. (2025). Empirical research into redress schemes for historical institutional abuse consistently reveals significant shortcomings from the perspective of victim-survivors. Working within a transitional justice framework, Daly documents how such schemes – though symbolically important – often replicate institutional hierarchies, impose evidentiary burdens, and offer limited opportunities for participation or voice (Daly, 2014; Daly and Davis, 2021a). Irish state-led schemes are similarly critiqued as a form of 'maladministration', highlighting their lack of transparency, restrictive eligibility rules, and the failure to engage meaningfully with victim-survivors (Gallen, 2023). While transitional justice has contributed to the moral and political framing of redress, actual schemes frequently prioritise institutional risk management over survivor-led processes, as shown in a comparative analysis of Ireland, Australia, and Canada (Keenan et al., 2025). These studies offer valuable structural insights but tend to remain focused on macro-level transitions and

institutional accountability. This article complements that work by applying procedural justice (Tyler, 2007) and restorative justice (Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007) as analytical lenses. These frameworks allow for a more nuanced understanding of how redress mechanisms operate from the perspective of victim-survivors. Where transitional justice foregrounds legal and political transformation, procedural and restorative justice direct attention to how justice is experienced in practice, at the interpersonal and procedural levels (Braithwaite, 2002; McEvoy and McConnachie, 2008).

Procedural justice and restorative justice

This study adopts procedural and restorative justice not as guiding principles embedded within the redress mechanisms themselves, but as retrospective analytical lenses to evaluate their effectiveness. These frameworks are used to assess the extent to which the mechanisms enabled dialogue, participation, voice, transparency, fairness and emotional or symbolic reparation; elements that lie at the heart of both approaches.

Procedural justice. Procedural justice is a critical factor in shaping victim-survivors' perceptions of fairness in justice processes. One of the significant findings of Thibaut and Walker's (1978) classic *Theory of Procedural Justice* is that processes matter to people. Procedural justice emphasises four core elements determining fairness perceptions: respect, trustworthiness, neutrality, and voice (Meyerson et al., 2021; Tyler, 2007). *Respect* involves dignity and sensitivity towards individuals; *trustworthiness* reflects fairness and consistency in authority interactions; *neutrality* requires unbiased assessment and *voice* allows individuals meaningful participation.

Crime victims particularly value these procedural elements, as fair treatment can facilitate emotional closure even without favourable outcomes (Koster, 2018; Laxminirayan, 2012, 2015; Mulder, 2013; Nascimento et al., 2023; Pemberton et al., 2017; Van Camp and Wemmers, 2013; Wemmers, 2013). Conversely, experiences of procedural injustice – such as being disbelieved, silenced, or treated as a legal case rather than a person – can lead to secondary victimisation. This refers to the additional harm experienced by primary victims after the offence, as their victimisation is prolonged, compounded, or exacerbated by the responses of others and their treatment within the (criminal) justice system (Condry, 2010: 236) and may further reinforce trauma (Murphy and Barkworth, 2014).

However, historical institutional abuse complicates procedural justice. Institutional betrayal – central to abuse experiences – can be reinforced when redress procedures replicate hierarchical and bureaucratic structures (Daly, 2018; Gallen, 2023). Such failures may result in processes that symbolically acknowledge wrongdoing while structurally maintaining existing power imbalances (McAlinden and Naylor, 2016). Thus, while procedural justice provides necessary foundations for fairness and trust, it alone might not adequately address deeper relational harms or victim needs for meaningful dialogue, emotional expression and personal or collective accountability.

Restorative justice. Restorative justice extends procedural justice by explicitly emphasising the relational (and often systemic) and reparative aspects of justice, making it a broad and evolving framework that encompasses a variety of practices aimed at repairing harm, fostering dialogue and addressing the root causes of wrongdoing (Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007; Van Camp and Wemmers, 2013). Restorative justice prioritises direct dialogue between victims and perpetrators, accountability, healing and transformation, addressing both individual harms and broader systemic

contexts (Aertsen and Schotsmans, 2020; European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ), 2021; UNODC, 2020), with its core principles of *encounter*, *repair* and *transformation* (Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007). *Encounter* involves all parties voluntarily engaging in meaningful discussions and decision-making processes about repair and justice (Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007). *Repair* addresses the victim-survivor's need for healing, the offender's need to make amends, and the community's need for relational health and safety (Restorative Justice Exchange, n.d.). Moreover, restoring community order, peace, and healing damaged relationships remains essential (UNODC, 2020). *Transformation* occurs when restorative encounters provide opportunities for individuals to undergo change. In the context of institutional abuse, this requires systemic reforms to provide guarantees of non-repetition, objectives closely aligning with transformative justice approaches (Gallen, 2023; Gready and Robins, 2014).

While restorative justice includes various models (e.g. conferencing and restorative circles), this study specifically utilises victim-offender mediation (VOM) because of its direct relevance to the mediation procedures analysed in this article (Goosen, 2016; Steyn and Pophaim, 2024; Terry, 2015). VOM facilitates structured dialogue between victims and perpetrators, allowing personal accountability, emotional expression and symbolic or material reparation (Umbreit, 2023; Van Camp and Wemmers, 2013). Its intimate and structured setting allows victim-survivors significant voice and agency, potentially restoring their sense of dignity and self-worth (Strang and Braithwaite, 2002). However, as mediation is typically private and focuses on the direct parties involved, generally, it does not incorporate broader community participation (Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007); a limitation when addressing systemic institutional abuse. While this may be considered a limitation in cases of systemic harm, the intimate setting can foster meaningful engagement between the victim and the offender (Nascimento et al., 2023).

Hence, procedural and restorative justice complement each other. Procedural justice establishes a baseline of fairness and transparency; restorative justice enriches this by directly facilitating dialogue, agency, and emotional reparation (De Mesmaecker, 2011; Hoyle and Batchelor, 2018). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive approach to evaluate the redress procedures taken in regard to Dutch clergy abuse.

The current study

Building on our previous *ex ante* evaluation of Dutch redress mechanisms put in place for victim-survivors of historical institutional abuse by Catholic clergy (Ormskerk et al., 2024), this study provides an *ex-post* evaluation of claimant experiences through qualitative interviews. While *ex-ante* evaluations predict the potential effectiveness of planned redress mechanisms, *ex-post* evaluations assess how well implemented procedures meet their intended objectives (Kovacic, 2005), critical for understanding the real-world effectiveness and impact of (redress) procedures. In doing so, this study examines whether the strengths and limitations anticipated in our earlier evaluation are reflected in the actual experiences of those who engaged with the redress procedures.

In this study, we investigate claimants' lived experiences. By focusing explicitly on these experiences, this research directly addresses an important gap highlighted by – among others – Aertsen and Schotsmans (2020), who note the limited availability of empirical evaluations of redress schemes from the perspective of those directly affected. Thus, our analysis contributes to broader scholarly discussions on victim-centred justice by empirically grounding theoretical insights in concrete claimant experiences.

Methods

Design

This research utilised a qualitative design, as part of a larger project examining claimants' perceptions of redress procedures addressing historical abuse in Catholic institutions in the Netherlands. It specifically explored whether these procedures fulfilled their intended objectives of recognition and repair. To capture victim-survivors' voices, we conducted a qualitative interview study. This approach ensures that experiences often marginalised by (institutional) practices are meaningfully included (Scraton, 2017 in: Pembroke, 2019).

Participants

We approached 22 potential participants, selecting victim-survivors who experienced historical abuse by Catholic clergy, irrespective of the abuse type. To prevent secondary victimisation, we intentionally avoided differentiating or classifying types of abuse, given previous evidence of harm caused by rigid typification in similar procedures (Bisschops, 2014; Van Dijck, 2018). Each participant actively sought recognition and repair through at least one redress mechanism.⁵ Three individuals were excluded due to marginal involvement or participation in unrelated mediation procedures. One individual withdrew from the study in a later stage. While generalisation was not intended, in-depth exploration of their experiences with the redress mechanisms allowed broader lessons to emerge.

Participant characteristics

Ultimately, 18 victim-survivors participated. The sample included 13 females and 5 males. In seven interviews, the principal claimant was interviewed together with a family member.⁶ The high proportion of female participants, partly recruited via the Women's Platform for Ecclesiastical Child Abuse (*Vrouwenplatform Kerkelijk Kindermisbruik*; VPKK), might have influenced emerging themes, particularly reflecting institutions such as the Good Shepherd, where female survivors predominate. An overview of participants and distribution across procedures is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Data collection

Three 'key contacts' facilitated participant recruitment, identified due to their expertise and active advocacy for victim-survivors of clerical abuse. Their names appeared in publicly (online) accessible sources. They were a filmmaker (documenting survivor experiences); a confidential advisor and advocate (serving on multiple survivor-focused commissions), and a victim-survivor (chairing an advocacy foundation), the last aiding participant recruitment and also participating herself as a research participant, sharing insights into lived experiences as advocacy efforts. In the case of the last contact, particular care was taken to ensure that consent was given freely, with the dual role explicitly considered during the ethical review process. Given their roles, these contacts initially approached participants to gauge interest and provided names to the researcher after preliminary consent. While efforts were made to prioritise participant autonomy throughout the recruitment process, it is nevertheless possible that some degree of bias was introduced.

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants.

Participant	Sex	Age	Type of abuse
Christian	Male	71	Sexual abuse
Wouter	Male	71	Sexual abuse
Flora	Female	58	Physical and psychological abuse
Annette	Female	56	Sexual abuse
Mary	Female	75	Physical, psychological and sexual abuse
Sandra	Female	73	Sexual abuse
Tina	Female	63	Forced labour
Cara	Female	70	Forced labour
Miriam	Female	72	Forced labour
Elise	Female	83	Forced labour
Molly	Female	73	Forced labour
Anne	Female	69	Forced labour
Arnold-Jan	Male	68	Sexual abuse
Eric	Male	81	Sexual abuse
Lies	Female	69	Forced labour
Joke	Female	71	Sexual abuse
Michel	Male	71	Sexual abuse
Mieke	Female	83	Sexual abuse

Table 2. Distribution of participants across redress procedures based on interviews.

	Reporting centre	Committee HEG	Final action	Institutional mediation	Temporary regulation	Triptych mediation	Civil court case
N claimants	6	2	-	1	7	5	4
Outcome	Granted (5) Unclear (1)	Granted (all)	-	Granted (all)	Granted (all)	Granted (all)	Unfounded (all)
Total (25)	6	2	-	1	7	5	4

Note. The total N of 25 does not correspond to the total number of participants (N = 18). In the table, participants who went through multiple procedures are counted as double.

Once participants had expressed their willingness to participate, the first author received their names and contact details and subsequently made contact via telephone and/or email. Participants were provided with both verbal and written information about the study, and upon confirming their agreement to take part, an interview was scheduled accordingly.

The primary author conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews between November 2021 and June 2023, mostly occurring between late 2022 and mid-2023. Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours and were audio-recorded. Participants received both written and verbal information about the study, with full informed consent obtained. Nine participants explicitly consented to use their real first names; others received pseudonyms for anonymity. Transcripts were shared with participants for validation. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Review Board of the University of Humanistic Studies (number 2020-001).

Given this study's connection to our earlier ex-ante evaluation, methodological precautions ensured findings were not simply confirmations of existing expectations. The topic list – which is

available upon request from the first author – was flexible, with open-ended questions designed to explore diverse experiences comprehensively. Participants reflected broadly on their experiences, including elements beyond the ex-ante evaluation. The sample's diversity further mitigated potential confirmation bias. Through an open-ended interview structure and diverse sampling, we aimed to capture claimants' lived experiences as fully as possible.

Data analysis

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we employed both deductive and inductive thematic analysis (TA; Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2020) to categorise interview data, identifying key themes illustrating claimants' experiences. In addition, narrative analysis (NA) complemented this approach, capturing lived experiences and emotional responses in-depth (Visse, 2014). ATLAS.ti version 23 facilitated systematic coding and analysis.

Positionality and reflexivity

We explicitly acknowledged our subjectivity in data interpretation, making reflexive TA and NA approaches particularly suitable. The interviewer (NRSO) – a female in her mid-thirties of Dutch-Caribbean descent with a background in clinical psychology and victimology – established rapport by acknowledging the impossibility of fully understanding participants' trauma, emphasising listening and learning from their accounts.

The majority of victim-survivors of the Good Shepherd spoke extensively about their victim experiences and the long-term detrimental consequences of the abuse, rather than focusing on the redress process itself. This contrasted with participants who were abused in other Catholic institutions, who generally discussed the steps they took to seek recognition and redress more freely. Although redirected towards their experiences with the procedure(s), allowing participants autonomy to narrate their stories was ethically and methodologically crucial. Interviews themselves occasionally functioned as significant moments of acknowledgement, independent of formal procedures.

A notable methodological challenge involved participants' difficulty naming specific procedures. In such instances, the interviewer requested detailed descriptions to accurately categorise experiences, ensuring procedural identification was precise.

Results

The result section is divided in two parts. First, we examine through the lens of procedural justice claimants' experiences with the Reporting Centre (i.e. the compliant and compensation procedures), the Committee HEG, the Temporary Regulation, and civil court cases. Then, we analyse experiences with mediation procedures (institutional mediation and Triptych mediation) from a restorative justice perspective.

Claimant experiences studied through the lens of procedural justice

Reporting centre. The Reporting Centre for Sexual Abuse within the Roman Catholic Church (2011) was an institutional procedure initiated by the Dutch Catholic Church to handle complaints

of sexual abuse and offer compensation through a formalised and bureaucratic structure (Ormskerk et al., 2024). Six participants described their experiences, often highlighting the emotional toll, rigidity, and occasional compassion within the process. One respondent – who was committed to a secure unit at the time – exemplified the psychological burden of the Complaints Committee hearing:

I had to be heard, of course, so the committee came all the way from Amsterdam to the closed institute in Tilburg to sit in a closed ward. . . . So in itself that people took the trouble [coming to me], but it actually only cost me. Because I was in a really bad state [mentally], and it [the procedure] cost me an awful lot of energy and it set me back a lot. It didn't give me anything. It just cost me, I had to start bringing up all kinds of things that they [the Complaints Committee] just literally wanted to hear out of my mouth. I understand that, because of course that is necessary in proceedings when you accuse someone as an offender. So I do understand that from a legal point of view. But of course it hasn't given me anything at all. It just cost me a lot (Annette).

This claimants' experience highlights a recurrent theme of vulnerability, exacerbated by procedural demands. It underscores the need for a more empathetic approach. The Complaints Committee acknowledged the importance of hearing her story and travelled quite a distance to get to her, an effort she acknowledges despite the hearing's high demands on her.

They did – and I did see that too, you know – they tried . . . , [the hearing committee] very honourably to [try to handle] as quick as possible. I think it was also impressive for them [the hearing committee] to be in such a setting, in a closed facility. Because I don't think they had ever experienced that before (Annette).

While the process did not contribute to her recovery, her motivation for participating was broader; rooted also in preventing future abuse: 'My goal is also always: I hope it changes for the future of others. And that also suits me. That it happens to no one' (Annette).⁷

Participants frequently criticised the procedures' adversarial approach, which heightened their distress. For example, one claimant described the hearing as excessively legalistic, as becomes clear from the following quote:

It wasn't the intention of the complaints procedure to mentally destroy the people who filed a complaint. But the lawyers of the opposing party did their best to simply break those people, by pretending that it was a legal case. They legalised everything and that was not what this procedure was about. So I don't have anything decent to say about the lawyers of the opposing party and the opposing party themselves, because they hired those lawyers. They were even warned by the Complaints Committee. (Mary)

For another claimant, 'The hearing was more like an interrogation' (Annette), and it highlighted the detrimental effect of the procedural framework on claimants' mental wellbeing. This suggests that there is a need to reform the rigid legal adherence process. The way in which the legal aspect of the procedure dominates is also apparent in the too formal letters that were written to claimants. Although the reason for the formality is seemingly the principle that everyone is innocent until proven guilty, it is an approach that can be hurtful to claimants. One respondent explained:

I had already received a letter that I had to go [to the hearing] and the letterhead said: 'a complaint does not have to be based on the truth'. That's when I exploded and threw the entire kitchen to pieces. When I went to the hearing and there was someone from the diocese, I said: 'If there is one – and there were about

thirteen or fourteen of them who all asked questions – I said: ‘If there is one who says that this [the abuse] did not happen, I will smash everything here to pieces, I don’t care who’. I was so furious. (Mieke)

Two claimants also described the emotional difficulty of recounting their abuse before a panel, highlighting how shame was manipulated during the process.

During the hearing I felt like I was the young woman with the feelings of a six-year-old girl. Outwardly I am a woman of 55, but then you have to tell those seven adults who are standing in front of you what had happened to you. And that’s almost impossible. (Sandra)

[I found the process] very difficult. Because after all, you have to tell [the Complaints Committee] something that you are ashamed of. And I think that’s also a trick they use. I think they’ve taken advantage of that quite often, because they know that you’re in such a situation that you have trouble telling your whole story. That’s what I found really mean. (Arnold-Jan)

A common thread was the perception of ‘*exaggerated neutrality*’ and a lack of empathy in the procedure; as illustrated by this participant’s account:

Everyone could have detached themselves from their positions for a while. A judge sitting there could also have shown their human side, instead of . . . But they could also have said at that moment: ‘Annette, I understand that it is very annoying and I also find it very difficult to ask, because I see that you are having so much trouble’. Indeed they tried that for a bit, but too little to get through to me properly, so to speak. I missed that in everything [the whole procedure]. Everyone remains professional. I miss the human touch. But then again, I found that lacking in general within the procedure’ (Annette)

Another important issue was the individualised focus of the redress process. Research indicates that institutional abuse affects not just survivors but also their broader social networks (Courtin, 2015; Ellis and Ellis, 2014; Hamber and Lundy, 2020; Kudlac, 2006). Studies further suggest that procedural fairness could be improved by acknowledging the harm suffered by secondary victims, for instance, by providing testimonial opportunities or collective acknowledgement in redress processes (Shaw et al., 2023; Twali et al., 2025). Yet, the process often failed to formally acknowledge these secondary victims. The case of these two claimants illustrates this gap, as one claimant (Sandra) actively sought to include another claimant (Joke) as a source of social support during her hearing, highlighting how claimants themselves sometimes acknowledge the broader effects of abuse and the need for more inclusive redress procedures.

At first Sandra asked me if I wanted to come along [to her hearing]. I said yes I would. Sandra then asked the committee for permission and they said: ‘she can come along but she can’t say anything’. Sandra had to tell her story and I wasn’t allowed to comment on anything, which was fine by me. When the whole procedure was over, I raised my finger. I said: ‘I know I’m not allowed to say anything at all, but now it’s over. Can I please say something now?’ Well, they allowed that. And I said: ‘I just have a question. You guys are going on about how often did this happen, how often did that happen? How often did they touch you? Were you raped? Are you this, are you that? I’m saying that I’m missing something here: namely what did the abuse do to your psyche? Because that is much, much worse than someone touching you’, which is what I say every time. And then they [the committee members] looked a bit bewildered. ‘I want to tell you all that that is the most important thing, the rest is all just secondary. It all comes down to what the abuse does to you, what it does to your children, to your husband, what it does to your brother’. (Joke)

Some committee members showed moments of compassion, offering glimpses of what a more empathetic approach could entail. Two claimants, though critical of the overall process, nevertheless praised the head of the Complaints Committee, who had notably advocated for their recognition despite institutional resistance:

What did do me good, within the procedure, that the nun refused to admit anything or make any concession about the abuse, and she was also very much supported by her Congregation. At one point the head of complaint committee really just put his head on the chopping block for me. And I thought, who does that for me? [. . .] This could cost you your job. And yet that has been an important element within the whole procedure. The weird thing is that you get your recognition from other things. But that such a person ties his fate to mine. Because that is obviously very special for someone to do that. (Annette)

I have a huge admiration for the head of the Complaints Committee. What an incredible man! At that Complaints [Committee], when I had finally won, when I finally got recognition from the Roman [Catholic Church]. . . . Afterwards those nuns had to sign. They actually didn't want to. Then I wrote an e-mail to the head of the Complaints Committee: 'I've been waiting for weeks now but they still haven't signed it and the deadline is almost, isn't it?' I thought he [the head] was going to explode. He was furious. He really forced the nuns to sign. That man deserves a ribbon. (Mary)

Legal representation during the hearings also mattered. One participant appreciated her lawyer's commitment to supporting her narrative:

But that actually had little to do with the proceedings. We were assigned a lawyer. A young lady, at least in my eyes a young lady. She was also a very committed woman, who actually wanted the [abuse] to surface. She was really passionate. That was very nice for me too, to have someone stand up for me to want to do that. (Annette)

Moreover, another participant appreciated the sensitivity of a psychologist on the Complaints Committee, who undermined the accused nun's credibility based on her familiar use of her name:

There were three people sitting there, the judge, a psychologist and a social worker. Then I had told my story and answered questions. And then the judges asked questions to [the accused]. Well, and [she kept saying] 'I don't know Flora. No, I don't know Flora at all. I don't recognise myself in her story at all'. She was talking and she kept mentioning my name. Then that psychologist, when she was done talking, he said, 'you know what I think is strange Sister? You are very familiar with Flora. And Flora has a name that is not very common. But you pronounce it so familiarly that it comes across to me that you know her quite well'. And I thought, now you've got her. You know, how she spoke about me . . . I thought, I've been through that [abuse], we've been through that, she [the accused nun] just knows that she knows me, even though she says she doesn't. So you know, that was also a bit of hindsight recognition which did give me some peace of mind. (Flora)

These moments aligned with core elements of procedural justice: voice, respect, and trustworthiness. Being 'heard' and 'seen' emerged as critical for participants, given the disbelief they often encountered from family (especially when abuse disclosure happened in their youth) and society. Annette and Sandra respectively stated that 'what I wanted was the recognition that I was seen. And that people believed you' and 'I just wanted to be heard and seen so badly'.

However, participants expressed concern about the separation between the Complaints and Compensation Committees, highlighting how this division limited the effectiveness of the redress process. As a claimant's account illustrates, while the Complaints Committee considered victims' personal testimonies, the Compensation Committee operated independently and assessed only quantifiable social harm. This lack of coordination meant that the emotional and personal impact conveyed in the complaints process was not meaningfully taken into account during compensation decisions: 'the Compensation Committee looked purely at social damage. . . . We weren't even involved. So I only got €50,000. Whereas, if they had thought it through and had been able to empathise with the victim' (Mary). This highlights the need for a comprehensive and multidimensional approach when addressing claims so as to better convey the complexity and full scope of claimants' experiences with the procedure. The separation between the complaints and compensation resulted in an outcome often perceived as unjust, as is also explained by a claimant:

I only received €50,000 because I had not been able to sufficiently demonstrate that [the abuse had a huge impact in my life]. Of course I have a lot of friends, that's not the point, but I no longer have a sexual relationship because I just can't, my body is broken. And the cause is that sexual abuse. (Mary)

This separation exacerbated feelings of injustice. Participants expressed a desire for procedures that would reduce emotional burdens by mandating personal testimonies in the presence of both legal representatives and institutional actors, rather than repeating it across disconnected settings. This could lessen the risk of re-traumatisation and ensure their voices were acknowledged in a more transparent and responsive process.

The Reporting Centre was widely experienced as rigid and adversarial, often resulting in secondary victimisation through the hearings, which were often emotionally taxing and lacked empathetic engagement. Although some participants felt momentarily 'heard' or 'seen' – suggesting isolated instances of voice and respect – the overall process failed to meet key procedural justice criteria, particularly neutrality and trustworthiness. The formal separation between complaints and compensation further fragmented recognition and repair, reinforcing rather than alleviating harm.

Committee HEG. The Commission for Help, Recognition, and Reparation for Violence against Minors in the Roman Catholic Church was an institutional procedure designed to evaluate claims and provide financial redress through a Church-led, quasi-legal process (Ormskerk et al., 2024). Those who evaluated the procedure positively emphasised the combination of formality and a greater degree of understanding and respect. One claimant responded:

At the Committee HEG, it was much nicer. Of course they have to follow the rules, but there was much more understanding. I really did feel recognised at HEG. Later I also got a letter: 'We understand that you have been through all this and we also understand the damage you have suffered in your life. The costs and everything. We have noted an amount for you and unfortunately we cannot give more because we are bound by that'. But you already felt from that letter that they had actually wanted to give me the €100,000. From that HEG committee, I had that recognition. (Mary)

Even though financial compensation was still constrained, participants valued the tone of communication in the acknowledgement of their suffering. They did not feel 'ambushed' by a 'committee of the wise', something which was mentioned by several participants who participated in the Reporting Centre. Furthermore, the committee's thorough preparation made a strong impression;

its members had familiarised themselves in detail with claimants' files. This approach fostered a sense of being genuinely heard; akin to the experience of offering testimony that is acknowledged and respected. Thus, the risk of secondary victimisation was minimised. Moreover, several participants emphasised the affective dimension of the redress process – especially the presence of genuine recognition – often held more weight than the monetary outcome itself. A claimant illustrates this point vividly:

I think I got €20,000 from [the compensation committee] and €22,000 from HEG. So I had a total of €42,000. I would have to look into it; I really don't remember this. But the feeling of how they dealt with me in that interrogation, how they reacted, and the letter I received later, for me, that softened it, that made it bearable, I have to say honestly. It was in the letter, the apology for the suffering they had done to me. The acknowledgement was in the words they wrote. And I also wrote a letter back then thanking them, saying that it had meant a lot to me. (Flora)

The Committee's approach contrasted favourably with the Reporting Centre's adversarial style. Claimants felt heard and acknowledged, and this made them feel that there was recognition and validation for their abuse. Respect, trustworthiness and empathetic communication during and after the hearings helped build trust in the Committee. Participants felt there was a genuine concern for their case. Unlike other redress mechanisms, the HEG Committee adhered to procedural justice principles – such as respect and trustworthiness – in such a way that the participants felt respected and valued.

Temporary regulation. The Temporary Regulation Financial Compensation for Victims of Violence in Youth Care (2020) was initiated by the Dutch government to offer financial redress to victim-survivors of historical abuse in youth institutions, including former pupils of the Good Shepherd institutions. While it extended eligibility to this group, it did not offer tailored recognition or address their specific experiences of forced labour (Ormskerk et al., 2024). In our sample, seven participants received compensation through the Temporary Regulation.

Their experiences were mixed. Some felt dismay that the Good Shepherd women were 'lumped' together with other youth care victim-survivors, especially since forced labour had been clearly written into the report by Houwerzijl and Heerma van Voss (2019). As one ex-pupil remembers:

Sander Dekker has promised €5,000 for all youth care victims.⁸ They did not have to provide anything: no supporting documents, because it is more of a concession, €5,000. Not compensation, not reparation but a concession. Because it is too complex to do all that so all victims received €5,000. And I agree with that. But there is a but. Our case has been declared proven, black on white. He [Sander Dekker] should have sent us separately to the Damage Fund for Violent Crimes. . . . That is what statutes are for. . . . And he didn't do that. Well I blame him highly for that. . . . We are not satisfied with the monetary compensation. I think it's a disgraceful treatment. To lump us together. We have had three years of forced labour behind the sewing machine from 8:30 in the morning until 6:30 in the evening. We also worked for the State. Velp made 144,000 army shirts, didn't they? That came from the State. So the State knew there was forced labour there. They knew that. And now to fob us off by lumping us together; 'fuck off'. No, that really pisses me off. (Lies)

Other pupils were not satisfied with the Temporary Regulation either, albeit for different reasons. One felt that the amount of monetary compensation felt 'like a kick in the teeth'. Another mainly referred to the finality of the Temporary Regulation when noting that 'I think it's a disgrace

to say to women: ‘It only runs until 31 December and then it’s done’. What if you come on 1 January and you have to read that, then you are too late. The politicians carried out their duties and then washed their hands from it’. (Tina)

Some ex-pupils blamed the Dutch state for their suffering, as was poignantly said by a claimant:

They admit that they treated us so badly. And that we were not criminals. . . . I say: if the State puts someone somewhere, they should have taken more control of the situation. And not let us down. And they never did. We just want the acknowledgement for what we worked for at the time. (Elise)

Although recognition from the State and the Good Shepherd was the primary goal – and it was not about monetary compensation – almost all participants felt that the €5,000 was a ‘joke’ (*een slechte grap*). Clearly (the amount of) compensation does matter as repair involves tangible measures such as financial compensation (Daly and Davis, 2021b). One of the ex-pupils compared the low amount to the amount of compensation received by ex-pupils in Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, who experienced forced labour at the hands of nuns and she stated that ‘We do know that in Ireland and other countries between €20,000 and €30,000 has been paid out. That should have been the case for us too’ (Miriam). Compensation reflects the seriousness with which an institution acknowledges harm. For it to be meaningful, it must be substantial and paired with justice mechanisms such as apologies and dialogue; not merely a financial transaction.

As the Temporary Regulation was a top-down state initiative, some former pupils – united in the Forced Labour Good Shepherd Girls foundation (*Kinderdwangarbeid Meisjes Goede Herder*; KMGH) – pushed for a bottom-up recognition process. This culminated in a monument erected in December 2022 at the former monastery in Velp: a rose-shaped artwork bearing the inscription ‘Name me, affirm my existence’ (*Noem mij, bevestig mijn bestaan*) after the poem ‘My mother forgot my name’ by Neeltje Maria Min. Tubes beneath the monument hold names of deceased girls from Good Shepherd institutions. Initiated by ex-pupils, the project involved KMGH, the Damage Fund Violent Crimes, the Pieter van Vollenhove Institute and the Good Shepherd Congregation. The monument aimed to acknowledge the suffering of all girls of the Good Shepherd, not only the deceased girls who were buried without a name or headstone. The collaboration developed cautiously over 4 years. The Chair of the KMGH spoke positively of the process and felt respected, particularly in her role in choosing the artist and in being treated as an equal partner by the Congregation. Several participants appreciated the monument as a place for reflection. Others were more ambivalent or critical, expressing concern that it risked excusing the Good Shepherd’s actions without formal accountability. For them, participation in the monument implied absolution in the absence of official acknowledgement of wrongdoing in court.

The Temporary Regulation was widely criticised by the ex-pupils for failing to offer meaningful recognition or repair. Most claimants viewed the €5,000 payment as inadequate and felt their personal experiences were overlooked. The standardised approach, designed for neutrality and efficiency, failed to provide individualised attention, undermining trust and voice. To achieve procedural uniformity, key principles of procedural justice (such as participation and personalised assessment) were compromised. Instead of fostering engagement, the process reinforced feelings of exclusion.

Civil court case: forced labour in the Good Shepherd. Dissatisfied with the Temporary Regulation, some ex-pupils pursued a civil court case against the Good Shepherd (ECLI:NL::2021:8863). This non-institutional route, led by lawyer Liesbeth Zegveld, aimed at compensation and institutional

accountability rather than symbolic recognition. Nineteen women were directly involved, with the Clara Wichmann Foundation representing around 160 other victim-survivors.

Their claim was dismissed in 2023 as time-barred, and an appeal is underway. In the Netherlands, limitation periods in civil law must be raised by the defendant and assessed alongside the case's merits (Article 3:322 BW). Courts can set aside the statute of limitations in exceptional circumstances, especially when the harm is serious, the delay is reasonable and enforcing the time bar would be manifestly unjust (ECLI:NL:HR:2000:AA5635, Van Hese/De Schelde). This was exemplified in the Rawagede case, where the Dutch court acknowledged the moral weight of colonial violence (Immler, 2018). The court case was driven by a need for accountability, as one ex-pupil explains:

I said to her [Liesbeth Zegveld] I will go to the bitter end If I lose or win, it doesn't matter. If we lose I don't think I have lost, because I made it pretty hard for them. I did everything in my power. But, history will be written. . . . I find it bizarre that we have to fight like this to prove that it had happened. Well, it had happened. (Lies)

Participants emphasised the need for recognition: that what happened was abuse, and it was wrong:

They [the Good Shepherd] destroyed my life. . . . They should have helped us in our adolescence. We were already damaged girls. . . . They worsened [our previous suffering] and I blame them for that. And that's why I'm litigating. . . . Take your responsibility. If they take their responsibility then healing will come for them and also for us. (Lies)

Another ex-pupil echoed this call: 'Well, let's put it this way: I've always blamed myself for the situation I'm in, even though I also know it's unjustified. I now want someone else to confess to being guilty'. (Molly)

The case was also about agency and being heard in court, a powerful space for public recognition. Even without expecting to win, being allowed to speak mattered deeply to the women, since their aim was to bring the powerful Congregation to its knees. Sharing their experiences in the courtroom was not only powerful for the claimants themselves but more broadly it meant there was a possibility of experiencing social support through the reactions and emotions that were shared in the courtroom. One claimant explains:

I was allowed to talk, we were allowed to talk for a while. . . . I was there. I know what I am talking about. I have experienced the abuse first-hand. That Good Shepherd director, he's been director for 12 years, he's heard about the abuse by hearsay. . . . [I could speak only very briefly] but I thought it was special and that is something. . . . That was very positive. . . . Then someone [in the courtroom] shows emotions and you have the idea that you are considered important. (Lies)

Here public storytelling is considered as crucial for preserving history, similar to the participation in the four-part documentary 'Girls of the Good Shepherd' (*Meisjes van de Goede Herder*; 2024).⁹ One ex-pupil appreciated the balanced approach of the filmmakers, ensuring that all perspectives are included:

It's kind of telling the story how it really was. So they [the filmmakers] approach it from all sides. They also interview the Sisters of the Good Shepherd; Everything is included, everything! So the public gets a whole picture. (Lies)

Not all 19 women had the chance to have their say in court. One described her experience of exclusion:

That the judge didn't allow me to say anything, I thought that was a terrible thing. But on the one hand, maybe it was a good thing. Who knows what kind of comments I would have made. Because I had really said: you people make me sick. (Elise)

Navigating the legal system proved difficult, making trust in legal counselling essential. All three praised their lawyers' dedication, especially Liesbeth Zegveld, who led the legal team. Conversely, the Congregation's lawyers were harshly criticised, with stating that their conduct in court, defending the Congregation, was even worse than the abuse of the nuns. Although the court rejected their claim due to the statute of limitations, participants valued the opportunity to testify publicly and be acknowledged in court.

Civil court case: sexual abuse in the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. After participating in the Reporting Centre, one claimant – Arnold-Jan – filed a civil lawsuit in 2019 against the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (ECLI:NL:RBLIM:2019:235). The abuse was time-barred for criminal prosecution, but civil proceedings remained an option. Determined to hold the Congregation accountable, he initiated a case in Roermond, later appealing to the Supreme Court in Den Bosch after the initial claim was dismissed due to lack of evidence and the statute of limitations. His case centred on the Congregation's prior knowledge of the perpetrator's abuse and their failure to act. Although he and his lawyer – Liesbeth Zegveld – had a strong legal argument, the case was ultimately dismissed; again due to time limits and lack of proof. The claimant explains his feeling of dejection:

They come up with a story like: 'prove that you were abused'. But what the claim was actually about, that didn't come up at all. Well, there lies my frustration and that stays in my head. . . . All my hope was directed to the Dutch legal system. I put my problem to the chief public prosecutor in Den Bosch. . . . Who puts that back to the chief public prosecutor. Who forwards it to the College of Public Prosecutors and they all understand my claim. Only, when I [started with the court case], it just went all wrong. It's one big disillusionment. (Arnold-Jan)

He experienced the trial as deeply unjust. His claim was never addressed substantively and he not only lost the case but was also ordered to pay litigation costs, which he described as 'a kick in the teeth'. The court process itself, he felt, caused secondary victimisation:

I think the decision by the court in Den Bosch was worse than the abuse itself. Truly outrageous. Judges are supposed to deliver justice, but instead they hit you in the face with all their legal tricks. . . . Honestly, I can't live with it like this. I was denied the right to call witnesses. That was allowed in Den Bosch, but not in Roermond; so I had already lost. . . . In the end, my claim was rejected on the grounds of the statute of limitations. All kinds of dirty legal manoeuvres. And meanwhile, I still have to prove that I was abused. (Arnold-Jan)

Despite efforts to present witnesses, the case was dismissed under limitation rules. His frustration points at broader systemic injustice: 'An institution always gets its right. And a layman in this society who gets it [wrong]. And that is not only the case with victims of sexual abuse'.

His experience mirrors that of other claimants, such as those in the Good Shepherd case, when, for example, facing legal and procedural constraints that silenced their stories. Claimants felt that

procedural efficiency was favoured over substantive justice. Possibilities for respect were also diminished with court proceedings often perceived as being indifferent to the claimants. The formal nature of the legal process, combined with the impersonal handling of sensitive cases, contributed to participants feeling that they were being disrespected. Trustworthiness, while present in claimant-lawyer relationships, was weakened by legal barriers that prioritised efficiency over justice. The formality of legal proceedings stripped claimants' experiences of dignity and respect, leaving them disillusioned and excluded from the justice they sought.

Claimant experiences studied through the lens of restorative justice

Institutional mediation. Institutional mediation – initiated by the Church – aimed to facilitate dialogue between victim-survivors and Church representatives within a controlled setting (Ormskerk et al., 2024). There was only one participant in this study who engaged in such mediation. Prior to this, the claimant had gone through the Reporting Centre, where the Compensation Committee awarded him €75,000 instead of the maximum €100,000. He explains:

I was ranked quite high [by the Compensation Committee in the Reporting Centre], but then I got €75,000 and that was my compensation. Whereas the maximum compensation is €100,000. So that made me very angry. Because I felt I was really in the highest category. I held the Reporting Centre liable. They had never experienced that before. Then the chair of the Reporting Centre contacted the superior of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and agreed that we would go into a mediation process. (Arnold-Jan)

Although the mediation was prompted by a disagreement over money, financial compensation was not his primary motivation. For him, holding the Congregation accountable meant compelling them to face both financial consequences and their moral responsibility. In the end, the mediation led to the maximum compensation being awarded. He credited the head of the Complaints Committee for facilitating the process and enabling meaningful engagement with the Congregation.

Institutional mediation shows only partial restorative potential. While participants met face-to-face with Church representatives in a structured setting, dialogue felt scripted and tightly time-boxed, limiting genuine exchange. Repair centred on lump-sum offers that addressed tuition fees or lost wages yet left emotional harm largely unacknowledged. The aspect of transformation remained weakest: the Church neither issued public apologies nor outlined follow-up reforms, so victim-survivors perceived the process as a one-off transaction rather than a catalyst for change.

This limited impact helps explain why a claimant pursued civil proceedings after mediation. A judgement was sought that could impose public accountability and create precedent; outcomes mediation could not deliver under its confidentiality rules. In short, institutional mediation delivered a controlled encounter and some material repair but failed to satisfy survivors' broader aims for recognition and systemic change, underscoring its gap with full restorative justice.

Triptych mediation. Triptych Restorative Mediation (2011) was a non-institutional process co-developed by victim-survivors and the Salesian order. Guided by independent professionals, it prioritised survivor participation and recognition outside institutional control (Ormskerk et al., 2024). The five claimants involved reported positive outcomes: 'Triptych went great! . . . I honestly can't say a negative thing about the procedure' (Sandra). Others felt validated when the Congregation exceeded the – in his case maximum – compensation cap by including lost sick pay: 'that does give you an honest feeling' (Michel).

Claimants valued the opportunity for direct, respectful dialogue in a supportive environment, highlighting the value of having a conversation with family members, even though her children chose not to participate. This inclusiveness extended to the recognition of various forms of abuse, as Michel noted that the process acknowledged both physical and emotional abuse, providing a platform for diverse experiences. On the advice of the VPKK, one claimant chose to participate in Triptych mediation, as the Reporting Centre was unable to acknowledge her need for recognition not only as a victim herself, but also on behalf of her father, who had worked at the abbey where the abuse took place. According to her account, he had been consistently underpaid and suffered a psychological breakdown after witnessing the blasphemous behaviour of members of the clergy. Recognition for the treatment of her father – crucial in her view – was made possible through the Triptych process:

I don't remember exactly whether [name arbiter] or [name mediator] asked me, but at one point in the conversation [name mediator] said: 'Sandra if you have to put your abuse or your father's grief in numbers, what would it be? So I said right away, mine would be 7.5 or 8 or so and my father's as high as 11'. (Sandra)

Mediators were praised for their empathy and ability to create a safe environment. One claimant described them as deeply engaged:

I still recommend that mediation [Triptych]. They are very nice people, [name arbiter] and [name mediator]. They are so involved. They just empathised with us. You could feel that too. So that's very important. (Wouter)

For members of the peer group *Boys of Maastricht*, solidarity with a Church official who had also experienced abuse deepened their sense of recognition and trust. Other participants also emphasised that apologies and spoken acknowledgement must be sincere to be meaningful. Despite overall satisfaction, concerns were raised. Some questioned the mediators' independence due to their perceived appointment by the Church. According to them the mediators were not entirely independent and thus potentially biased. Others criticised rigid harm categorisation and a focus on monetary outcomes. One noted how difficult it was to classify experiences, which often felt arbitrary and inadequate for capturing the depth of individual experiences:

The mediators decided what you were going to get. For me, it became €100,000. And the whole group were asking themselves: 'Where do I belong, to which category?' That's terrible in itself. But yes, it is very difficult for people to classify the abuse. (Michel)

While compromise was inevitable for some, others reflected that the impact of financial redress reached its limits: 'But then again, I received €100,000. And I think, if I had received €2 million [in compensation], the effect would have been exactly the same' (Christian). This aligns with findings that while financial compensation serves as a form of acknowledgement, its impact reaches a threshold beyond which higher sums do not necessarily enhance victim-survivors' satisfaction (Daly and Davis, 2021a). Similarly, satisfaction depends not just on the amount of compensation, but also on fairness and process (Daly and Davis, 2021a; Kunst, 2012).

Members of *Boys of Maastricht* also saw their participation as a way to prevent future abuse, especially in missionary contexts. They felt a duty to speak out, linking recognition to guarantees of non-repetition.

In sum, Triptych fostered meaningful encounters and partial repair. While financial recognition was achieved, challenges such as mediator bias and procedural limit hindered transformation. Still, it stands out as a promising model within the restorative justice framework.

Discussion

We drew on participant narratives to explore how different redress mechanisms were experienced and what these experiences revealed about the nature and limitations of procedural and symbolic justice. We adopted a meta-perspective that situates individual accounts within wider institutional, legal, and epistemic frameworks.

Participants generally perceived the *Reporting Centre* as overly legalistic. Although designed to be more victim-friendly than litigation, it was often described as impersonal and rigid. Some committee members engaged empathetically, fostering a sense of being heard and seen, key elements of procedural justice. Yet, overall evaluations remained negative. By contrast, *Committee HEG* was praised for combining procedural justice with emotional sensitivity, making participants feel respected and heard. The *Temporary Regulation*, while providing financial compensation, failed to deliver meaningful recognition. *Civil litigation* offered a public platform for accountability but was undermined by procedural barriers like statutes of limitations, which led to all cases being dismissed without compensation. These outcomes reinforced participants' sense of injustice and emotional harm. Civil litigation thus highlights the tension between procedural justice ideals and the rigid application of legal norms.

Mediation procedures, particularly *Triptych mediation*, showed strong potential for recognition and repair. Triptych mediation offered a unique dialogical setting that many participants described as emotionally reparative. Claimants appreciated the ability to shape the process – including inviting relatives and setting the tone – which contrasted with the narrow proceduralism often observed in formal legal processes (Sköld et al., 2020). Although some noted concerns about mediator neutrality and categorical constraints, Triptych stood out for its openness to diverse forms of harm and active listening. *Institutional mediation* – initiated by the Church – was designed to offer a formalised setting for mutual engagement between claimants and institutional representatives. Nonetheless, its genesis within the Church itself led several participants to question the authenticity of its neutrality and to perceive underlying asymmetries of power. While VOM contributed to recognition and repair, this study underscores the need for complementary mechanisms that also address institutional responsibility and structural reform (Gready and Robins, 2014).

Recognition, particularly public acknowledgement of harm, was central to many claimants. This extended beyond financial reparation to validation in public or collective settings, such as the courtroom or mediation. Mechanisms that allowed victim-survivors to address institutions directly were experienced as empowering. However, recognition must be balanced with emotional safety and confidentiality. Respecting this balance ensures recognition affirms dignity and agency. Redress mechanisms should therefore support participation while safeguarding survivors' control over their narratives.

Comparative insights show that *Committee HEG* uniquely combined procedural fairness with empathy, qualities largely absent in the *Reporting Centre* and *civil litigation*. *Mediation processes* – though dialogical and inclusive – were at times hindered by perceived bias. The *Temporary Regulation* – though efficient – lacked symbolic value and failed to acknowledge lived trauma. These findings align with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual

Abuse (2017), which found that hybrid models integrating financial, emotional and symbolic recognition tend to yield more meaningful outcomes.

Participants shared insights during the interviews not only into the nature of the harm but also into the form of redress required. Even when procedural details were vague, they clearly articulated what recognition and repair meant to them. This study prioritises such claimant-defined knowledge to challenge epistemic injustice; defined by Fricker (2007) as harm done to someone in their capacity as a knower. Testimonial injustice occurs when survivors' credibility is undermined; hermeneutical injustice when they lack the means to articulate their experiences (Fricker, 2007; Kidd and Carel, 2017; Kok et al., 2022). Enright and Ring (2020) explored epistemic injustice in the context of historical institutional abuse in the Irish Catholic Magdalene Laundries. They documented similar patterns in the Irish redress processes, where survivor accounts were sidelined in favour of institutional narratives.

Across multiple redress mechanisms – such as the Reporting Centre and the court cases – claimants reported being treated as objects of examination rather than authoritative witnesses to their own histories; they were required to substantiate harms already verified by earlier investigations. Such demands exemplify Fricker's (2007) notion of testimonial injustice, in which institutional epistemic authority eclipses survivor testimony. This evidentiary burden – present to varying degrees across the redress schemes – reproduced existing power asymmetries and further diminished the credibility of survivor accounts (Daly, 2014; O'Mahony and Doak, 2017).

Moreover, while personal validation remained essential, several participants implicitly linked the need for recognition to broader institutional and public acknowledgement. They reflected on the responsibility of state and Church structures in enabling systemic abuse and expressed a desire for visible forms of accountability. For some, initiatives such as the Velp monument served as meaningful gestures of collective recognition beyond individual compensation. This indicates that redress cannot be fully effective if confined to the private or interpersonal domain. Mechanisms lacking public or institutional acknowledgement risk leaving structural dynamics unchallenged and may inadvertently reproduce earlier silencing. Similar concerns have also been raised in international literature on redress for institutional abuse.

A broader perspective emerges when we consider how other international contexts have approached redress. Our results echo international research that warns against adversarial, highly formal redress models. Norwegian work by Studsrød and Enoksen (2022) documents the ambivalence survivors feel when deciding whether to engage with schemes, while the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) and the New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (2024) show that overly legal procedures can retraumatise claimants, silence their voices, and undermine participation. Together, these studies highlight the need for survivor-centred approaches that embed procedural justice values such as voice, respect, and fairness. At the same time, our Dutch case study adds three refinements to this debate. By examining six mechanisms side by side, it reveals how victim-survivors confront contrasting justice logics within a single national context, thereby illustrating where tensions between legalism and recognition arise in practice. The analysis also foregrounds under-represented experiences, notably of women subjected to forced labour, underscoring the importance of historically specific forms of recognition. Finally, it translates broad calls for survivor-centredness into concrete design features – shared control over process, tailored compensation, and institutional follow-up – that made justice tangible for participants.

Building on this, we show how victim-survivors interpret ‘meaningful’ recognition as more than symbolic gestures or standardised payments. Participants valued personalised apology letters, co-designed mediation formats, and reparations that acknowledged specific harms such as forced labour and lost wages. These contributions sharpen international debates on survivor-centred redress by offering empirical evidence of how such values can be operationalised in practice. We detail how such elements can be embedded in future mechanisms in the policy recommendations below.

Policy recommendations for future redress mechanisms

Taken together, our findings and earlier international work show that survivor-centred redress demands more than abstract promises: it must embed procedural safeguards – free narrative testimony, empathetic yet assertive committee members and (legal) aids, and enforceable outcomes – alongside restorative opportunities such as co-created dialogue, acknowledgement of structural harm, and public acts of accountability. Building on these requirements, we propose three design priorities for future mechanisms.

First, evidentiary burden should be minimised. Where systemic abuse has already been documented, adopt presumptive validation so survivors are not forced to ‘prove’ their experiences repeatedly; excessive paperwork merely reproduces the power imbalances that enabled abuse (Daly, 2014; O’Mahony and Doak, 2017). Second, narrative-based, trauma-informed practice should be used. Frameworks that respect survivors’ autonomy and voice – and avoid rigid legalistic filters – counter epistemic injustice and accommodate complex lived realities (Fricker, 2007; Gready and Robins, 2014). Third, public acknowledgement should be coupled with emotional safety. Recognition should be available but never obligatory; victim-survivors must control how their stories are shared so dignity and agency are protected while social accountability is advanced.

Taken together, these measures offer a potential pathway towards redress that not only compensates but also supports symbolic recognition, relational repair, and institutional accountability, provided they are implemented in ways that centre survivors’ voices and needs.

Future research: justice and recognition in redress

Future work should broaden the scope of survivor experiences in redress procedures. Larger, more diverse cohorts could be achieved through a mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, co-designed in partnership with national redress bodies and survivor advocacy groups to ensure sensitivity and relevance. Data collection should prioritise diversity in gender, age, type of abuse, and institutional context, potentially facilitated via outreach through trusted intermediaries. Such collaboration would not only increase access but also help counter epistemic injustice by centring survivors’ voices in both the design and dissemination of the research.

In addition to focusing on individual survivors, future research should critically examine the broader social impacts of clerical abuse, particularly its effects on survivors’ familial and communal relationships. Several participants in this study noted how abuse strained or fractured their relationships with family members, contributing to long-lasting social isolation. While some scholarship has begun to explore these dimensions (Courtin, 2015; Edwards and Humphrey, 2020; McDannell, 2023), this area remains underexplored. Clerical abuse often results in multi-generational trauma, distorting family dynamics and severing survivors from their communities. Studies

have shown that survivors frequently carry burdens of shame and secrecy that affect not only their own psychological recovery but also the wellbeing of subsequent generations. The Church's institutional response – characterised by silence and protection of perpetrators – has exacerbated these damages, transforming survivors into 'ghosts' within the collective memory of their communities (Edwards and Humphrey, 2020). Future research must address not only individual recovery but also community-level healing and social reintegration. For example, work by Immler (2012, 2020) highlights how reparations for historical harm – such as those pursued by Jewish families – can deeply affect intergenerational relationships, identity, and memory. These social dynamics in redress processes shape and are shaped by the experience of harm and its attempted repair. This direction is crucial for understanding the full scope of harm caused by clerical abuse and for designing more comprehensive redress and recognition mechanisms.

Strengths and limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the small and self-selecting sample constrains the generalisability of findings, shaped by the sensitivity of the topic and participants' privacy concerns. Second, outcome data (such as whether claims were upheld) were recorded but not used analytically. This is primarily because none of the participants in our sample were denied monetary redress – apart from those who pursued civil litigation – rendering comparative outcome analysis unfeasible. This was not a deliberate design choice but a limitation resulting from the composition of the sample. As such, the analysis centred on participants' narratives and emotional experiences of the redress process. Third, while most prior research has focused on male victims (Royal Commission, 2017; Terry et al., 2011), this study broadens the field by highlighting forced labour and psychological abuse experienced by women.

The Dutch case study answers calls for cross-national perspectives (Aertsen and Schotsmans, 2020). Open-ended, participant-led interviews allowed rich narratives to emerge, mitigating the risk of reproducing institutional logics. For some participants, the interview itself became an informal site of recognition, especially for those previously denied a safe forum to share their experiences. Ultimately, these insights reaffirm the ethical responsibility of researchers to create spaces that honour survivors not only as witnesses to harm but as experts in redress, so that future recognition does not risk repeating the very injustices it seeks to repair.

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Data availability statement

Data that support the findings of this study will be available at the Archives of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) DANS at The Hague. However, restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under licence for the current study and are therefore not publicly available at this time. We anticipate that the data may become accessible via DANS in the future (potentially in 2026). In the meantime, the data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Notes

1. The abbreviation derives from the three German universities that conducted the large-scale research project on behalf of the German Bishops' Conference, namely Mannheim, Heidelberg and Gießen; thus: MHG stands for the Mannheim – Heidelberg – Gießen Study.
2. All bishops in the Dutch Ecclesiastical Province form the Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands – a permanent consultative body – in which the bishops jointly formulate and implement policy in various fields. The Bishops' Conference members are made up of seven resident bishops, their auxiliary bishops and titular bishops who fulfil a function in the Dutch ecclesiastical province (www.rkkerk.nl/kerk/kerkprovincie/bisschoppenconferentie/). The Conference of Dutch Religious is the umbrella organisation of (almost) all religious orders and Congregations in the Netherlands. It represents the interests of priests, friars, nuns and brothers and encourages cooperation between various monasteries (www.knr.nl/over-kenr/wie-zijn-wij/).
3. <https://www.kmgh.nl/over-ons>
4. For a detailed exploration of the redress procedures, see Ormskerk et al. (2024).
5. None of the participants participated in the Final Action or the civil case against the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.
6. In a different study (Ormskerk et al., 2025), we explored how family members of victim-survivors experienced the redress procedures; in this study, we only focus on the victim-survivors. Thus, the data from the family members are omitted in this study.
7. Within the field of transitional justice – which has emerged as an evaluative framework for justice measures addressing clerical abuse since a decade ago (Gallen, 2016; Gallen and Gleeson, 2018; Ludwin King, 2017; McAlinden, 2013; Stan, 2023) – this phenomenon has been called 'guarantees of non-repetition' or 'guarantees of non-recurrence'.
8. Sander Dekker served as Minister for Legal Protection from 2017 to 2022. In this role, he acknowledged the rights of the 'girls of the Good Shepherd' for the forced labour they endured in the congregation's institutions.
9. The four-part documentary *Meisjes van de Goede Herder* explores the experiences of former residents of the Good Shepherd convents in the Netherlands. Filmmaker Britta Hosman followed three ex-pupils as they break their silence after decades, seeking recognition and justice for their past suffering. The series includes interviews with former pupils, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, and institutional representatives, offering a comprehensive perspective (<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/meisjes-van-de-goede-herder.html>).

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